

Lessons Learned from the Wildfires
Council President Scott Peters, First District
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Nearly four years to the day after the start of the devastating Cedar and Paradise fires, San Diegans again smelled the acrid smoke of raging wildfires scorching a path from the mountains to the sea. Over one thousand homes across the county were destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of acres of our beautiful open space are blackened. Rancho Bernardo was definitely the hardest hit. My thoughts are with the many families affected by this tragedy.

More than half a million residents were evacuated from neighborhoods across the city and county, including the District One communities of Rancho Peñasquitos, Torrey Highlands and Black Mountain Ranch, clogging roads and overwhelming the Red Cross and other disaster response agencies. The City was quick to respond and open Qualcomm Stadium as an emergency evacuation site. Although the City has little experience in this area, city staff oversaw a clean, safe and orderly site, for which the Mayor and his staff deserve a great deal of thanks.

Our regional readiness for wildfires has greatly improved since 2003, and most people are pleased with our response this month. Now, as we move from emergency to recovery, we will reflect as we always do about what we have learned and what we can do better next time.

One of the most frustrating aspects of the evacuation for residents was the confusion over which communities were under mandatory evacuation orders, and which weren't. This was particularly true for Peñasquitos and the newer neighborhoods along the 56 corridor. I often found myself editing public announcements from emergency personnel to more accurately reflect our district's geography and provide greater clarity for concerned residents. It is my hope that if ever these communities must be evacuated in the future, emergency officials will provide more specific directions, using clearly recognizable streets as boundaries.

The Reverse 911 system established after the 2003 fires was a major improvement in communicating with the public, warning residents of impending evacuations and helping avoid unnecessary deaths. However, the system was set up to only place calls to landlines. As more and more families abandon traditional landlines for cell phones, it becomes imperative that we add those numbers to the emergency systems. Residents can register their cell phones with the Reverse 911 system through the City's website, www.sandiego.gov.

Another concern we heard from residents along the 56 corridor was that they were prevented from returning to their homes while residents of other communities were allowed back in. I understand that frustration. However, at that time the fire was still active around Black Mountain with the potential to burn westward to the sea. Protecting Black Mountain was necessary to protect the communities of Black Mountain Ranch,

Torrey Highlands and Rancho Peñasquitos. Luckily, firefighters beat back the flames to protect the mountain and prevent the loss of any homes in District One.

Wildfires are a natural part of our region's ecology. The key to protecting homes and structures is to reduce the amount of dense, dry brush which fuels the flames. After the 2003 fires, the City made brush thinning a priority. The City Council tripled the amount set aside in the budget for brush management and mandated a 35-foot "buffer zone" around homes and structures. More must be done to build on this success, including additional personnel and equipment to thin brush in fire-prone areas. I will work with my Council colleagues and the Mayor to provide additional funds in next year's budget.